

Message Text

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AMEMBASSY SOFIA

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C O N F I D E N T I A L MOSCOW 04706

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, MILI, UR

SUBJECT: BREZHNEV AT LENGTHY AWARDS CEREMONY -

SHCHERBITSKIY ON TV

SUMMARY: BREZHNEV APPEARED HEALTHY AND RELAXED IN TV
COVERAGE OF KREMLIN AWARDS CEREMONY MARCH 14. HE STOOD
WITHOUT APPARENT DIFFICULTY THROUGHOUT TWENTY MINUTE
FILMING AND SPOKE CLEARLY, FOR HIM, IN DELIVERING BRIEF
CONGRATULATORY COMMENTS. IN KIEV, SHCHERBITSKIY APPEARED
AT MARCH 14 KOMSOMOL CONFERENCE TO DELIVER OPENING DAY
SPEECH. END SUMMARY.

1. MARCH 14 TELEVISION NEWS PROGRAM "VREMYA" CARRIED

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NEARLY TWENTY MINUTES OF BREZHNEV AT KREMLIN AWARDS
CEREMONY FOR TOP-RANKING MILITARY COMMANDERS. BREZHNEV
LOOKED WELL, HIS VOICE WAS FIRM AND HIS HAND STEADY AS
HE READ CONGRATULATORY STATEMENT FROM THE PRESIDUM OF
SUPREME SOVIET AND CPSU CC "ON THE OCCASION OF THE
SIXTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE SOVIET ARMY AND NAVY."

2. AFTER DELIVERING A BRIEF SPEECH, BREZHNEV SPENT BALANCE OF TV TIME HANDING OUT MEDALS, KISSING THE TWICE BLESSED, AND LOOKING ON RATHER VACANTLY AS SOME RECIPIENTS EXPRESSED THANKS TO LEONID IL'ICH AND THE CC OF "OUR PARTY" (IN THAT ORDER) FOR THE HONORS BESTOWED.

3. BREZHNEV'S REACTION TO INDIVIDUAL RECIPIENTS AS THEY CAME TO RECEIVE THEIR MEDALS (ASSUME DEPARTMENT HAS FULL LIST FROM TASS) VARIED GREATLY. THOSE HE WELCOMED WITH KISSES WERE MOSKALENKO, YEPISHEV, CHUYKOV AND DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF COUNCIL OF MINISTER NOVIKOV. FLEET ADMIRAL GORSHKOV DID NOT GET A KISS BUT INSTEAD A WHISPERED MESSAGE (OF CONGRATULATIONS, PRESUMABLY) AND A PARTICULARLY WARM HANDSHAKE.

4. BREZHNEV SHOWED AN UNUSUAL WILLINGNESS TO JOKE DURING TELEVISED CEREMONY. IN HANDING GENERAL KAZAKOV HIS AWARD BREZHNEV HELD ON TO THE BOX AFTER THE GENERAL HAD REACHED FOR IT, SMILED AND MADE AS TO SPRINKLE SALT (OR HOLY WATER) OVER THE PACKAGE WITH HIS OTHER HAND. BREZHNEV LAUGHED AND KAZAKOV SMILED AS THOUGH THE GESTURE WERE AN OLD AND PERSONAL JOKE.

5. BY CONTRAST BREZHNEV SHOWED NO ENTHUSIASM IN HANDING OUT REMAINING THIRTEEN AWARDS, WHOSE RECIPIENTS, FOR THE MOST PART, ACCEPTED THEIR MEDALS, VOICED A RAPID "I SERVE THE SOVIET UNION" AND MOVED BACK TO THEIR SEATS. ONE EXCEPTION WAS AIR FORCE GENERAL A.I. BABAYEV. AFTER RECEIVING HIS AWARD FROM AN UNSMILING BREZHNEV HE ASKED

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FOR PERMISSION TO SPEAK AND BEFORE BREZHNEV COULD LIFT AN EYEBROW LAUNCHED INTO A LOUD AND OVERLY LENGTHY STATEMENT OF THANKS CONCLUDING WITH PRAISE FOR BREZHNEV'S "KNOWN" LEADERSHIP IN DEVELOPING STRONG MILITARY DEFENSES. DURING THIS AND OTHER SUCH UNSOLICITED REMARKS BREZHNEV STARED INTO SPACE BLANKLY.

6. EXCEPT FOR THESE MOMENTARY LAPSES OF ATTENTION, BREZHNEV HANDLED HIMSELF WELL AT THE AWARDS CEREMONY. HE APPEARED RELAXED AND CONFIDENT AND EVEN AT TIMES ENJOYING HIMSELF ENOUGH TO LAUGH, A RARE SIGHT FOR LEADERSHIP WATCHERS.

7. SHCHERBITSKIY. AFTER AN ABSENCE OF ALMOST FOUR WEEKS, SHCHERBITSKIY REAPPEARED IN PUBLIC MARCH 14 AT UKRAINIAN KOMSOMOL CONFERENCE. RUMORS IN KIEV HAD SHCHERBITSKIY CONVALESCING IN CRIMEA AND PERHAPS STILL TOO ILL TO RETURN TO BUSINESS, BUT HE APPEARED QUITE WELL ON EVENING TV NEWS COVERAGE OF KOMSOMOL GATHERING. TOON

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